State of the art

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The entrance to an eventful past

A gallery and shop for those with a passion for art and photography, Plâté offers visitors the chance to travel back in time.

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Plâté is the brainchild of A W A and Clara Plâté, a European couple who, in 1890 travelled to what was then known as Ceylon and were struck by its stupendous beauty and exotic ways of life. The pair ventured into the art industry by establishing a photography studio at the Bristol Hotel in Fort, Colombo. The intention was to create a convenient spot for travellers to drop by and enjoy their depictions of Island life. But as the clientele grew they moved their premises from the harbour to Colpetty to expand their operation.The Plâté store today is a compact glass-fronted boutique offering saris, shawls, paintings, accessories and artefacts. But there’s much more to the place than first meets the eye: the real

treasure lies tucked away behind the store in the art gallery and studio.

I entered through wooden doors to a short hallway filled with cabinets and pictures of old Ceylon, setting out on an atmospheric journey into the past. One glance at the wooden interior, with its long staircases and elaborately decorated railings, is all it takes to realise the genuine architectural value of the place. The gallery and studio, with its wide range of art works, art supplies, books on architecture, literature, music and periodicals, is a paradise for connoisseurs of visual art and culture. The art supplies section includes paintbrushes, pencils, inks, charcoal, canvases, art books and guides, a range of surfaces, and famous English brands such as Winsor & Newton, Daler-Rowney, Koh-I-Noor and Derwent. It’s a place that encourages people of all levels of talent to embark on creative journeys all their own.

The multitude of collectibles scattered over the many floors of the gallery and studio tell a story of heritage and culture going back generations. Gramophones, wooden horses and brass elephants, crystal and china, African masks, musical instruments, clocks, antiquated weighing machines, lamps, telephones, equipment used in the film industry, models of classic cars and much more hail from across the world and speak of outstanding dexterity and style.

The team at Plâté is constantly travelling the globe in search of vintage treasures, handpicking every piece to ensure that clients get only the best. The wide range of paintings they stock, some as large as two metres across, are popular with hotels and corporate customers as well as people purchasing pieces for their homes. The canvases range from seascapes and landscapes to animals, still lifes and portraits.

Sun beams in the colonial-
style studio

A distinctive feature of Plâté’s offering is its age-old collection of photographs of Ceylon. An enthusiastic team of photographers wandered about the Island in the early days of the company, capturing the sensational atmosphere, scenery and people of the time, its fashions and ways of life. Added to that, in a time when Sri Lanka was best known for importing tea, the photographers captured the marvels of the tea industry, the process and people behind it. Today Plâté proudly houses a collection of sepia photographs that hark back to an extraordinary moment in time.

Also noteworthy is the collection of Bohemia Crystalware, precious collectibles that

twinkle away in glass-fronted cabinets and make perfect housewarming or wedding gifts. Plâté’s collection of china, from cup and saucer sets to vases and pots, is also truly spectacular, rich in detailed decoration and enticing colours.

Adding to the prestige of the place is the Plâté studio and picture framing service. Although the studio photography tradition is slowly slipping away, professionally trained staff are always on hand, firm in the belief that getting together and making a trip to the studio is an effort by itself. The extensive collection of photographs that I caught sight of during my visit looked flawless and timeless in an era dominated by outdoor photography. Picture framing, meanwhile, is a bespoke service drawing on a wide range of imported mouldings. Wooden frames are the most popular option but Plâté also provide metal frames in pastel hues.

Plâté, which was handed over to Arthur P Fonseka in 1950, now stands as a prestigious art gallery and studio with paths leading back through the generations. It’s a place to get lost in art, undisturbed by the rigours of modern commerce (though the friendly staff are always available if you need them); a place you can travel the world without even leaving your hometown.

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